

Assemblages of Syrian suffering: Rhetorical formations of refugees in Western media

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Abstract

As the influx of displaced people around the world continues to grow, the international community has yet to settle on a solution. According to Bülent Diken (2004), society is unable to determine whether the refugee is truly a worthy subject of human rights or simply a criminal, making it all the more important to analyze the conflicting representations of refugees in mainstream media. This rhetorical analysis examines discourses within highly read and referenced articles from Western (U.S. and U.K.) media sources during the first wave of media coverage of the violence in Syria during the fall of 2012 until the spring of 2014. Western media discourse surrounding the Syrian civil war and more specifically the refugee crisis can be understood as an assemblage of meanings that may account for the confused, contradicting, and sometimes complementary representations of Syrian refugees (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Puar, 2007). The competing discourses of refugee experiences reflect a rhetorical element of the state of exception, recreating conditions of bare life and precarity through discourses of disposability. This paper explores the texture and implications of three distinct lines within the Western media assemblage of the Syrian refugee that represent displaced people 1) as a dangerous burden, 2) as disaster and humanitarian *raison d'être* and 3) as a humanized subject. The analysis concludes with a reframing of the modernist, structuralist subject position of the refugee by reconceptualizing media representations as an assemblage to show how seemingly contradictory constructions can cooperate to perpetuate the refugees' experiences as sacred and disposable (*conventu sacer*).

Keywords

Postcolonialism, State of Exception, Media Discourse, Critical Rhetoric, Refugee

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, the United States has been reluctant to accept refugees from Syria. Many provisions of the law on resettlement make it difficult for Syrian refugees to be granted permanent rights if they have not faced political, religious or sexual persecution, while many displaced people lack documentation (Gearan, 2013). Additionally, anti-terror laws in the US have created yet another hurdle, targeting Syrian refugees and in many instances preventing their migration altogether (Jordan, 2014). After the attacks on Brussels and Paris in November 2015, discourses prioritizing national security over humanitarianism have resurfaced with West Virginia legislators discussing plans to place refugees under surveillance, create additional delays, and allow state and local governments to have veto authority over resettlement plans (Troshinsky, 2016). Meanwhile, over 2 million people are living in refugee camps within Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Turkey, and Lebanon, while the United Nations estimates that 9.3 million more are facing desperate conditions and are in need of food, clean water, and secure living conditions (Zaracostas, 2014). It is estimated that over 270,000 people have died in the conflict at the point of publishing (Troshinsky, 2016). Although Western media outlets continue to look on as Syrians suffer, the conflict is constructed as an isolated regional concern, withholding criticism of the government’s response, specifically, US foreign policy on Syrian refugees. Tough questions need to be asked. Considering that the US accepted nearly 70,000 people as refugees in 2014, why is it that only 132 have been from Syria (United States Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2015)? How are refugees being represented that might contribute towards inaction and apathy regarding the refugee crisis? How might Western media representations construct a view of the Syrian refugee that perpetuates problematic beliefs and colonial legacies?

Although this paper problematizes the discourse of humanitarianism, I have no intention of denigrating the benevolence of aid or diminishing its importance. Of course, food aid is critical to sustaining the life of refugees. However, the discussion about and benevolence of humanitarian aid must not end with simply keeping refugees alive, which is what Agamben (1995a) refers to as “bare life.” Even with sufficient calories to sustain their bodies, refugees continue to suffer within and outside of the camps. One in five Syrian refugee girls are forced into marriage with men they’ve never met, some as young as 10, in order to avoid sexual violence and to escape the dire conditions of poverty (Watt & Wintour, 2014). Many Syrian refugees are not granted work visas and are living off what little savings they may have. Furthermore, millions of Syrian children are deprived of adequate nutrition, education, medical attention and safety, while 10,000 more have died in the conflict (Chuck, 2014). According to Bülent Diken (2004), society is unable to decide whether the refugee is truly a worthy subject of human rights or simply a criminal, making it all the more important to analyze the representations of refugees in mainstream media that influence this important interpretation.

Focusing on articles published in the U.S. and in the U.K., this paper argues that Western media discourse surrounding the Syrian civil war and more specifically the refugee crisis, illustrates what Puar (2007) calls an assemblage of meanings that may account for the confused, contradicting, and sometimes complementary representations of Syrian refugees. In other words, a critical reading of Western media examines how these texts employ representations of refugees in order to simultaneously justify inaction and reify colonial legacies.

1. Media Representations

First, because this project views the rhetoric and representations of refugees as an assemblage, a wide variety of texts is required for a critique that explores the multiplicity of different representations of refugees within dominant media interpretations. The interpellated subject of the refugee is only one line within the assemblage, of which there are a variety of alternate conditions in which one can understand the self and others (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 130). Representations of refugees in Western media can be understood as occupying space within a multitude of subjectivities characterized by its rhizomatic structure. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) explain, “an assemblage is precisely this increase in the dimensions of a multiplicity that necessarily changes in nature as it expands its connections. There are no points or positions in a rhizome, such as those found in a structure, tree or root. There are only lines” (p. 8). Thus, this paper explores the texture and implications of three distinct lines within the Western media assemblage of the Syrian refugee through representations as a dangerous burden, as the humanitarian *raison d’être* and as a humanized subject.

Journalism and media representations play an important role in sense making and popularizing ideology for mass consumption. “Both journalism and modernity are a product of European societies over the last three or four centuries. Both are associated with ...industrialization and imperial expansion” (Hartley, 1996: 33). In other words, rhetorical criticism of media representations can facilitate a larger critique of the colonial implications of modernity. Indeed, journalism attempts to present an objective view of reality, rather than acknowledging the multifaceted interpretations of reality that compose refugee assemblages (Bailey, 2009).

This paper examines representations of Syrian refugees within Western (U.S. and U.K.) media between 2012 and 2014. Textual representations of Syrian refugees was narrowed down to a set of articles that focus specifically on the refugee crisis, discounting articles that only mention refugees in relation to the civil war, the Assad regime, U.S. political intervention and other angles or topics that pertain to Syria.¹ Similarly, Puar (2007) discusses assemblages of the terrorist figure in Western media as a rhetorical formation, which cannot be concretized as a single subject, but rather is comprised of a moving set of discourses and conditions. Approaching the refugee as a similar type of assemblage in Western media means that identities are not simply subjects, they are spatially and temporally contingent collections that can be better understood as an intersection of various texts, representations and enunciations (Puar, 2007). In this paper I focus on Western media assemblages of the Syrian refugee, which require piecing together disparate discourses and “fragments of texts” that characterize Western media’s interpretations of the Syrian refugee during the ongoing civil conflict (McGee, 1990). Thus, glimpses of refugee assemblages can be seen by looking at the multiple and varied articulations of the refugee body that attempt to regulate it through constructions of humanitarianism.

¹ Lexis Nexis was used as the primary tool to index and sort the textual data, narrowing down the articles on Syrian refugees to 212 news articles from mainstream publications in the United States and the United Kingdom published between January 1, 2012 and December 31, 2014. Data collection was limited to textual publications and television and radio broadcast transcripts were excluded. The inclusion of “Syrian refugees” in the headline or as the main subject of the article was used as criteria for inclusion in the analysis. Exemplar quotations were chosen that are representative or replicated throughout the data in similar ways.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This paper draws together two distinct threads of communication and critical/cultural literature, considering conversations in 1) postcolonialism and 2) necropolitics in the state of exception to sort through and complicate the multiple representations of Syrian refugees in Western media. In an attempt to resist replicating or reifying Western hegemonic interpretations of the Syrian refugee, postcolonial theory will supplement and inform a wider critique of the geopolitical complexities and colonial legacies impacting the Syrian crisis and the experience of Syrian refugees. Drawing from a tradition of postcolonial scholarship (Said, 1977; 1985; Bhabha, 1994; Mohanty, 1984; 2003) discourses of Orientalism, colonialism and xenophobia will be traced in the text and positioned within geopolitical and historical legacies of power.

Next, extensions of Agamben’s (1995a; 2005) concepts of the state of exception, homo sacer and bare life will provide a conceptual framework for critiquing representations of Syrian refugees. Furthermore, Mbembe’s (2003) concept of necropolitics is useful in discussing the implications of the representations and policy rhetoric that characterize multiple different interpretations of the Syrian refugee crisis.

A plethora of communication and interdisciplinary literature from a variety of approaches has taken on the subject of refugees and border rhetorics, which encompass questions of how citizens are constituted as subjects and how the other is limited from belonging. Concepts such as sovereignty, abjection and alienation have been useful subjects for rhetorical critics looking at the representations of bodies excluded from typical political life (Demo, 2005; DeChaine, 2009). The refugee has been represented in global media in a number of different ways. KhosraviNik (2010) identifies a number of discursive strategies that were used in British media to represent asylum seekers, such as aggregation, collectivization, functionalization as well as humanization or individualization as strategies for empowerment. The humanitarian discourse of compassion rhetoric can counter notions of the refugee as a “queue jumper” who cheats the system, as identified by Foye and Ryder (2011). Overall, the literature supports the idea that refugees are often represented through negative and dehumanizing rhetoric, which tends to denigrate the existence and rights of the refugee in non-native spaces (Leudar, Hayes, Nekvapil & Baker, 2008). However, this study makes two unique contributions to research focusing on refugees and postcolonial rhetoric, 1) it reframes the modernist, structuralist subject through the notion of the assemblage to show how seemingly contradictory constructions can cooperate to perpetuate the refugees’ experiences as sacred and disposable (*conventu sacer*) and 2) by problematizing benign humanitarian rhetoric to illustrate how it can conceal colonial legacies.

3. Theoretical Justification

Postcolonialism provides a theoretical basis for undoing epistemic structures “by writing against them, over them, and from below them by inviting reconnections to obliterated pasts and forgotten presents that never made their way into the history of knowledge” (Shome & Hedge, 2002: 250). From a discursive approach, postcoloniality can be understood as a historically situated relationship between “Westerners” and “Non-Westerners” that is accomplished through both discursive and organizational practices that implicitly and explicitly privilege Western norms and standards of enacting social change (Norander & Harter, 2011; Narayan, 1997). The

colonialist stance can be reproduced through Orientalist representations of Syrian society as backwards, violent and inherently primitive (Cloud 2004; Said, 1977; 1985). As the West attempts to write the history of refugees in the Syrian civil war, postcolonial theory invites us to dig deeper for alternative histories suppressed by the Western media's cultural narratives.

Postcolonialism is uniquely well suited to a critical analysis of the competing narratives and histories of Syrian civil war because it situates them within the processes that construct geopolitical arrangements, relations among states and organizations, and inter/national histories (Shome & Hedge, 2002). For example, the primacy of US interests can be distilled from rhetoric that attempts to disguise its agenda with humanitarianism. Additionally, it contributes concepts such as agency, self-reflexivity, and provides a theoretical framework that accounts for the interdependence of symbolic and material struggle in a global society.

The historical and geopolitical positioning of the Syrian conflict through a postcolonial lens facilitates a critique that can account for materiality within discursive systems of power (Prasad, 2003). For example, Syria has endured a history of conflict, occupation and colonization. A subject that receives little attention in Western media is the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights, a region Southwest of Damascus that buffers the border between Israel and Syria. Although Israel has offered (limited) help to refugees, some Syrians are hesitant to accept help as the two countries consider themselves in a state of war (Weinthal, 2014). However, postcolonial theory complicates binary narratives the oppressed and the oppressor. Youssef Chaitani (2007) details the complex relationship between Syria and Lebanon, as well as their history of French occupation. Considering the historical influences in the region offers degrees of both complexity and clarity to the ongoing conflict in Syria and the representations and responses that characterize Western rhetoric. Western support for Israel and the colonial histories of the region makes it difficult for the Syrian opposition parties to accept aid and pursue the deterritorialization of Golan Heights while still remaining credible within all factions of Syrian nationalist groups.

Finally, postcolonialism opens up a discussion of alternatives to Western homogenizing characterizations of refugees. Alternative narratives may articulate a much different range of refugee experiences, creating the possibility for what Homi Bhabha (1994) calls the third space. This type of "interstitial agency" is characterized by its denouncement of binaries and competing dualisms that naturalize hierarchies (Bhabha, 1996). By refusing to come down on either side of antagonistic social tensions, third spaces engender hybrid identities that destabilize dominant cultural narratives. For example, some stories that have garnered less attention in the West include Syrian refugees who tell stories about receiving healthcare, food and shelter, as well as building relationships with Israelis and Lebanese that they otherwise would have avoided (Weinthal, 2014). Amidst geopolitical tensions, hybrid strategies resist the performance of normative cultural roles by refusing binaries that assume superiority, objectivity and encourage selective segregation, isolation, and violence. By taking an historical perspective on humanitarian rhetoric and assemblages of the refugee within Western media, the analysis illustrates how the complex and contradicting representations justify both inaction and the expansion of Western networks of influence and control through humanitarian rhetoric in postcolonial regions like Syria.

Section four will first engage in a justification of the theoretical approach followed by a detailed discussion of Syria and surrounding refugee camps as they relate to the state of exception,

contextualizing the material conditions of bare life through a postcolonial analysis of the historical legacies of power affecting the region. Second, media representations of refugees as dangerous and burdensome are shown to emphasize the threat they pose to national security. Then this section illustrates the way humanitarian rhetoric can stand in for more sincere and empowering forms of assistance, while the fourth section both applauds journalistic attempts at humanizing Syrian refugees, while attempting to problematize the summation of their experience and citations of Western perspectives and voices of authority.

4. Postcolonial Camps of Exception

Agamben's (2005) concept of the state of exception is useful in interrogating the suspension of rights as a product of law, as is the case in the ongoing civil war in Syria as well as within refugee camps maintained via international law and non-governmental organizations. The state of exception can be understood not as a special kind of law itself, such as martial law or emergency powers, but as a “suspension of the juridical order itself” which also defines the limits or threshold of the law simultaneously (Agamben, 2005: 4). For instance, the state of exception has explanatory force in its application to existing refugee camps, as well as the general state of conflict in Syria as it has historically been used in times of revolution to uphold the constitution or governing principles that it also suspends (Agamben, 1995a; 2005). However, the exception also illustrates how inaction or complicity in human rights abuses and suffering is made acceptable under the pretense of sovereignty and security. For example, the suspension of rights in the war on terror, migration rights in this instance, continues to negate the human rights the war seeks to defend. The state can render individuals “homo sacer,” excluding them from the political realm of life (bios) that would guarantee their rights as subjects, reserving nothing for them except a state of bare life in which they are given only the basic necessities to keep refugees alive (zo) (Agamben, 1995a). Thus, the same laws that create a state of exception in the war on terror preclude the United States from legally accepting Syrian refugees and allow the conditions of bare life for refugees to persist.

However, Agamben takes a very structuralist perspective, which would assume homo sacer occupies a singular subject position which characteristically would discard the political value of their life. For instance, the state of exception has traditionally been used to describe the states encroachment of rights on citizens. For years, refugees were strategically constructed as terrorists to avoid acquiescing to requests for asylum (Jordan, 2014). However, Deleuze and Guattari (1987), offer an alternate way of conceptualizing the construction of homo sacer, as an assemblage or a multiplicity of subjectivities, hence, *conventu sacer*. The sacred assemblage of the refugee can be seen as both unworthy (burdensome, dangerous) and worthy of humanitarian gesture. Here, Mbembe's (2003) concept of necropolitics illustrates how insecurity and scarcity become rhetorical weapons for distributing death among large populations, but in a way that is compatible with the rhetoric of humanitarianism. States can use class logic to justify the control over life in refugee camps as well as determining which populations should be allowed to live in scarcity and ultimately death (Mbembe, 2003; Foucault, 2008). Refugees are allowed access to only the most basic resources, keeping them barely alive, rendered *conventu sacer* in a state of bare life.

In sum, this paper will discuss and disrupt assemblages of the Syrian refugee in mainstream Western media by identifying some of its rhetorical lines and reading them against alternative interpretations. Postcolonialism provides a theoretical lens through which to contextualize and challenge Western representations. Additionally, Agamben's (1995a; 2005) concept of the state of exception and *conventu/homo sacer*, as well as Mbembe's (2003) necropolitics are used to discuss the implications of dehumanizing rhetoric. More specifically, a poststructural approach to the refugee as an assemblage problematizes Agamben's conception of *homo sacer*. Refugees are not singular subjects, they are interpellated as a multiplicity through media representations that are deployed in ways that construct them as a burden and a danger to society, at the same time imploring the reader to alleviate their guilt through humanitarian rhetoric and attempting to escape the dehumanization of statistics through self-representation.

Syrian Conflict and Sovereignty

Syria has a long and complex history of imperialism and occupation, not unlike its regional neighbors (see Chaitani's book, *Postcolonial Syria and Lebanon* for a more complete history). The refugees displaced by the Syrian civil war include a range of different ethnicities, religions and cultural groups. Prior to 1943, France occupied the land that is now Syria and Lebanon, although foreign troops remained in both territories for years (Chaitani, 2007). After Syria and Lebanon successfully ousted the French administration from their homeland, the countries underwent a process of urbanization and economic development in which the local economy and political system flourished. This is also around the same time that Syrian Arab nationalist became a more prominent. Shortly after, the Arab-Israeli war of 1948 displaced hundreds of thousands of people. Today, generations of Palestinian refugees have lived and are now dying in Yarmouk, one of the largest unofficial refugee camps in a district south of Damascus (Evans, 2014). Although the stories surveyed for this study generally do not distinguish between different ethnicities, using the general term, "Syrian refugees" fails to acknowledge the differential treatment they receive. Palestinian refugees in particular face difficulties in being granted status as a refugee or asylum in neighboring countries. Lebanon and Jordan fear that taking on more Palestinians will escalate tensions with citizens and the state of Israel, leading to fierce competition among them (Surrusco, 2013). Yarmouk has been a site of continual violence throughout the Syrian civil war, as Palestinians are split between support for the Syrian Army and the anti-Assad Free Syrian Army (FSA).

Undoubtedly, state violence has become an all too common occurrence in Syria, echoing Agamben's idea of the state of exception as a normative position of sovereign power. However, postcolonial theory complicates the notion of sovereignty as it is administered by one dominant group in power. Within postcolonial zones of exceptions, sovereignty resembles more of a horizontal network of partial sovereignties than a top-down hierarchy with one ruling nation state (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2006). Imperial powers no longer need boots on the ground, settlers, or traditional legal sovereignty, they can be administered from a distance, influencing border control, governmental proceedings, economic decisions and so on. The increasingly ephemeral qualities of colonialism make it all the more important to understand how colonialism operates rhetorically to reinforce historical power relations. The Syrian civil war is an example par excellence of the complicated intersection of international and local power relations that occur in the "colonial encounter" (Hardt & Negri, 2009: 69). Quoting Walter Mignolo, "there is no modernity without coloniality because coloniality is constitutive of modernity" (Hardt & Negri, 2009: 67). In other words, modernity as a system of power relies on a hierarchy in which non-

European peoples and civilizations are seen as primitive, or lacking (Hardt & Negri, 2009). For instance, Syrian society is characterized as weak and deficient even before the civil war began. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (2014) explains that that war is compounded by a “state that suffered from poor governance, a weak economic base, and intense population pressures even before the civil war began” (Cordesman, 2014). Surrounding nations that are taking on refugees are discussed as “weak,” referencing their “inability” to properly deal with the Sunni and Shiite minorities in a region where “neighbors communicate by car bomb” (Onishi, 2013; Gardner, 2013). Within this narrative, oppressed populations must buy into the systems of Western modernity in order to rescue themselves from hopeless violence and instability. In this way, media discourse positions refugees as a symptom of primitive social arrangements that may only be addressed through modernity.

Modernity is rooted in the biopolitical regime and intricately connected to sovereignty. “The perception of the existence of the Other as an attempt on my life, as a mortal threat or absolute danger whose biophysical elimination would strengthen my potential to life and security—this, I suggest, is one of the many imaginaries of sovereignty characteristic of both early and late modernity itself” (Mbembe, 2003: 18). In other words, the concept of sovereignty within the age of modernity relies on the construction of threats that can be justifiably exterminated. For example, Assad is a threat to the refugees and rebels, the rebels are a threat to Assad and the stability of Syria, and refugees are a threat to all. Mbembe defines sovereignty as consisting “of the will and the capacity to kill in order to live” or the power to decide on the state of exception (p. 18). Paradoxically, Western media representations of the Syrian crisis illustrate an important and unrecognized dilemma within Mbembe’s conception of modernity when forced to evaluate threats and distinguish between them. Op-Eds and news articles are forced to confront the question, which is the greater threat; the threat to national sovereignty or the threat to global governance? In other words, the West is in a double bind; advocating inaction out of respect for national sovereignty is complicit in a crisis at risk of “genocide” (Reuters Staff Writer, 2014). On the other hand, with Russia as a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council, intervention risks fracturing the international community in a way that threatens the efficacy of global governance mechanisms like the United Nations, an organization charged with both protecting sovereignty as well as upholding international law (von Eggert, 2012). Thus, the rhetorics of humanitarianism and sovereignty intersect in ways that work against traditional intervention, and instead endorse a humanitarian expansion.

Western media discourse legitimizes the sovereignty of extraterritorial intergovernmental networks of humanitarian aid organizations in order to resolve what Goldsmith (2013) calls the “illegal but legitimate” dilemma. Although the U.N. can legally intervene in a sovereign nation when the government fails to protect its citizens, it cannot do so without U.N. Security Council approval. To intervene unilaterally may be legitimate but it is illegal and would disable the West from acting against others who adopt an “illegal but legitimate” doctrine in ways deemed undesirable (Goldsmith, 2013). As London’s Financial Times explains, “the Westphalian principle of non-interference demands the world leave in place Bashar al-Assad’s murderous regime in Syria” leaving humanitarianism as the only legitimate option. In sum, Western media ends up being loudly in favor of intervening in Syria, while Western nations can be found “hiding under the bedcovers” (Stephens, 2013). Thus, it is especially critical that the rhetoric of humanitarianism is interrogated from postcolonial and poststructural perspectives.

Postcolonialism uncovers important silences in Western media representations of the refugee crisis, namely the inability to access land and resources in the Israeli occupied Golan Heights. After the war of 1948, Israeli-Syrian relations have never recuperated and are still considered to be in a state of war, although no large scale organized conflict has occurred. Israeli occupation and colonization of Syria has lasting effects on refugees who are not permitted to return to land that was once theirs, especially in times of conflict or instability. Although, colonialism has taken on new forms, Israel's enclosure of the Golan represents the continuation of old technologies of colonialism, specifically, the division of space, maintenance of boundaries, and the regulation via a "language of pure force, immediate presence, and frequent and direct action" (Fanon, 1991, p. 39). For example, Israel is constructing a fence along the demilitarized zone that separates the Golan from the rest of Syria. The perpetuation of colonial divisions through force limits Syrian refugees agency and illustrates the power of the sovereign to "define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not" (Mbembe, 2003: 27). Pointing out these gaps or media silences is an important part of the postcolonial project to spur discussion from perspectives that are neglected or otherwise overlooked in mainstream discourse. Even within a paradigm of international non-intervention, political pressure on Israel from Western nations to relinquish the Golan could provide alternate solutions for Syrian refugees.

Levy (2010) argues that refugee conditions illustrate "the evolution of a new regime of neo-refoulement in which zones or camps are designated as anomalous. Refugees are not necessarily sent home, but they are left in equally precarious conditions. Extraterritorialization through intergovernmentalism describes the way that Western NGO's and aid organizations physically occupy and control sovereign territories within the framework of humanitarianism. While this is not necessarily colonization in the sense that one sovereign nation is annexing another territory, it does justify the multilateral occupation and cooperation through which refugees are managed. The confinement of refugees to camps of exception is represented and rhetorically justified through assemblages of the refugee as a burden and a threat, and the humanitarian *raison d'être*. Even rhetorical attempts to empower the refugee as a human may assist in the denial of political agency and limit their claims to rights within a framework of sovereign citizenship.

4.1. Constructing the Dangerous Burden of Refugees

This study finds that Western news outlets continue to enact a history of discursive exclusion and discrimination towards migrants and refugees, associating them with problems and criminality (van Dijk, 2005). Although some outlets maintain a neutral stance towards refugees, national security concerns have reverberated throughout Western media spaces, constructing one assemblage of the Syrian refugee as a dangerous burden to the countries that aid them. This is accomplished in two ways: first, through the rhetoric of natural disasters, which emphasizes the devastation refugees have on countries that help them and second, nationalist rhetoric that constructs outsiders as threats and terrorists.

First, the rhetoric of national disasters pervades articles on the Syrian refugee crisis. The increasing presence of refugees is characterized as a burden that is dangerous for the host countries, emphasizing the effect they have on the surrounding regions, rather than the suffering of the refugees themselves. Refugees are constructed as a "wave;" a "flood;" a "human tide" (Thompson, 2013); or a "human river" (Freeman, 2013) that "swamps" neighboring countries that cannot "absorb" them (Fielding-Smith, Guler & Aglionby, 2013). As one article reports, "the

peak week in November saw 20,000 cross the border. They are fleeing Syria by the metaphorical boatload. So many are crossing and sometimes recrossing the border that Lebanese officials aren't sure the exact size of the human tsunami gradually sinking their country” (Thompson, 2013). Other times refugees are described in terms of an earthquake or a fire spreading rapidly, “the epicentre of deadly violence is at its worst inside Syria but it is causing tremors that reverberate into neighbouring countries” (Jolie & Guterres, 2012). Rather than a disaster happening to people, people are characterized as if they are the disaster themselves. Simply being out of place, refugees are threatening to “ignite what the UN's Kelley is calling Lebanon's ‘tinderbox’” (Thompson, 2013). Not only is this dehumanizing, but it completely displaces the suffering of the refugees by prioritizing their effect on regional communities.

Second, many media reports use statements from people in power, such as politicians, that perpetuate nationalistic constructions of the refugee as a terrorist and a threat to security. For example, referencing Syrian refugees, Republican chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, Robert W. Goodlatte of Virginia asks, “with today's national security threats why would we ever willingly loosen our immigration laws to allow those who have helped terrorists game the system?” (Preston, 2014). Some refugees, who had simply sold food or provided minor aid to suspected terrorist groups, were classified as such and were denied asylum. Constructions of the refugee as terrorists rely on problematic threat rhetoric and security calculations that attempt to prevent any risk or possibility of vulnerability. The assemblage of refugee as terrorist erects a rhetorical fence of familiarity that seeks to isolate those who fit normative ideas of the American citizen and ward off all forms of difference.

Previous research has found that refugees are often portrayed as a threat and a burden, threatening the stability of the country they would inhabit, for instance putting pressure on housing, education and health systems as well as straining resources more generally (KhosraviNik, 2010; van Dijk, 2005). However, in light of the Syrian civil war, media discourse has focused on the threat of refugees bringing with them radical ideologies and violent skills. NBC News reports that, “foreign fighters returning home to the U.S., Britain and other countries after honing their skills in Syria's civil war are posing a “nightmare for security services,” experts and officials say (Austin, 2014). Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson earlier this month said that the U.S. government was “very focused” on the issue of militants returning to the country” (Austin, 2014). This rhetoric reflects and reproduces stereotypical xenophobic fears of refugees as radical extremists that form the blueprints for an engineered society of exclusion and otherness (Svirsky & Bignall, 2012).

Furthermore, the fear of difference takes on specific qualities; constructing otherness in the Syrian refugee crisis as a contagion. “They are people who are highly trained for violence and killing” is a pullout quotation in large bold letters. “Pantucci warned that even if those coming back did not intend to carry out a terrorist act themselves, they could have a radicalizing effect on young men who would be drawn to them or impressed by their battlefield heroics” (Austin, 2014). A Huffington Post's headline reads, “Syrian refugee camps may be a breeding ground for terrorism” (Driscoll, 2014). It is more than the refugee bodies that pose a physical threat, it is their psychological existence that has contagious qualities, threatening to pass the disease of radicalism and otherness onto whoever may come in contact with them.

This reactive rhetoric is what Svirsky and Bignall (2012) call the “strategy of immunitas” (p. 57), which cultivates an oppositional attitude that continuously seeks to cleanse the space of control. In other words, rhetoric is one of the “little machines” that individuals actively employ against the other, to reify historical boundaries of exclusion through paranoia and fear (Deleuze & Guatarri, 1987). The theoretical value of the concept of immunity is that enriches and expands Agamben’s ideas on the state of exception by desubjectivizing the operation of exceptionality (Svirsky & Bignall, 2012). In other words, the addition of immunitary rhetoric moves the analysis beyond the individual bodies rendered homo sacer in physical zones of exception, to a broader focus on “the ways of life denied to us as a result of exclusionary historical processes”. (Svirsky & Bignall, 2012: 60).

Moreover, the immunitarian rhetoric that constructs refugees as a radical threat to national security reifies historical exclusion, both via US immigration policy as well as through the policies of our allies, specifically Israel. Xenophobic rhetoric actively reaffirms, in new ways, old colonial legacies that are historically constructed. For example, Israel has literally built a wall between the Israeli occupied territory of Golan Heights and the rest of Syria in response to the civil war. After Israel built a fence along the Egyptian border primarily to keep out migrants, the Guardian reports that “Israel is to build a huge steel fence along the boundary between the Golan Heights and Syria amid fears that the civil war could spill over or create an influx of refugees” (Sherwood, 2013). This is the “immunitarian cord” that keeps people apart, reaffirming difference as a threat to national sovereignty (Svirsky & Bignall, 2012: 62). Thus, rhetorical exclusion has real, material effects that assist in the maintenance of Israel’s parameters of colonial exclusion.

4.2. The Refugee as Humanitarian Raison D’etre

Another line within the assemblage of displaced Syrian people is that of the helpless, passive refugee that beg a humanitarian response. Indeed, refugees are often robbed of their property, employment, families, and disempowered in extremely significant ways. However, refugees are also resilient, determined, and resourceful. Constructions of the refugee as helpless should be viewed as merely one assemblage, and not entirely representative of their experience or possible experiences. Moreover, constructions of the refugee as unconditionally helpless and passive constitute a basis for unquestioned aid that renders refugees as the object of aid and not active participants. The refugee as humanitarian raison d’etre can stand in for more meaningful participation in their empowerment.

Daley (2013) explains how humanitarian assistance, “though of critical importance at times of emergency, has unexpected and adverse outcomes in the long term, some of which may be counter to effective integration or reintegration. Humanitarian action should be viewed as being complicit in the reconfiguration of citizenship and identity that is taking place in the region” (p. 909). Humanitarian assistance to refugees can function as a rhetorical cover that deflects criticism. For example, purveyors of aid are portrayed as generous, while refugees, because of their construction as helpless, passive victims, must be unquestionably grateful recipients, despite the inadequacy of aid. According to the Washington Post, “international relief officials say they are frustrated by the small number of refugees admitted, as well as the long waiting times and high security hurdles applicants must navigate for resettlement in the United States. But officials are reluctant to say the very small numbers making it to U.S. shores mean that the United States

isn't pulling its weight” (Gearan, 2013). In other words, the relatively small amount of aid donated by nation states permits the continuation of refugee’s exclusion from citizenship and the rights it affords the individual. The reintegration and recognition of refugees can be delayed or denied as long as “humanitarian aid” can substitute for more meaningful action.

However, the tropes within Western media presents refugees as obligations and burdens for others to help. Refugees are not only characterized as a natural disaster burdening host countries, but asylum seekers are consistently characterized as negative problems that government must deal with (KhosraviNik, 2010). For example, Fox News host Rachel Marsden (2014) writes, “what's the point of intervening in a foreign country under the guise of humanitarianism, or sending aid, if you're just going to end up importing its citizens en masse anyway? Isn't the whole idea to shape up the place so that its people can safely remain there” (para. 1)? Indeed, empowering refugees that are dispossessed of their homes, families, and belongings might be a seemingly more preferable option than granting asylum, however, this discourse frames asylum and humanitarian aid as mutually exclusive choices, in which accomplishing one should relieve the obligation to the do the other. Rachel Marsden is an example of a symbolic elite, whose discourse, although they may have limited policy or decision making power, aids in legitimizing perspectives on minorities and refugees in particular (van Dijk, 1993). Moreover, discourse that constructs refugees as natural disasters obviously imply that no country should willingly invite this upon themselves. Similarly, KhosraviNik (2010) finds that refugees are often reduced to a political issue, rather than framed as real people deprived of their human rights and ability to participate in their own empowerment and future.

Almost every article indexed for this study reports refugees in terms of statistics, in part because the refugee crisis is comparatively significant in terms of the size and scope of those affected. The number of people displaced by the conflict rivals the Rwandan genocide (Onishi, 2013). However, van Dijk (2005) found that statistics were used as a media strategy to connect concepts of criminality and foreign bodies. Similarly, media engaged in the homogenization of ethnicity and the use of statistics to aggrandize and aggregate the increasing numbers of refugees. Articles tend to refer to “Syrian refugees” as if they are a single homogenous group without important ethnic, racial, religious, and other differentiating facets of their identity. KhosraviNik (2010) calls these discursive strategies aggregation, collectivization and functionalization. The homogenization of refugees and the media’s failure to distinguish among them conceals the disparate treatment and ethnic divisions which divide them and determine who lives and dies. In one Guardian post, the writer acknowledges the statisticization of suffering stating, “now, inside the confines of the sprawling Zaatari refugee camp a few miles away from the Syrian border in north-west Jordan, he appears as a number, a statistic, his life a shadow of what it was. He seems to be wholly displaced – physically, geographically, socially and psychologically” (Tisdall, 2014). Attempts to capture the suffering of refugees through numbers and aggregation fail to humanize the experiences of the individuals that compose those statistics and may only exacerbate the perception of refugees as a problem.

Thus, “humanitarian gestures” indicate the threshold, in other words, when something becomes a catastrophe, at which point it requires a response (Svirsky & Bignall, 2012: 192). The miserable conditions that many refugees endure illustrates how nations and international non-governmental organizations give only enough aid to keep the majority of refugees alive. At times, reading Western media felt like a rhetorical “pat on the back” when reporting on donations or reforming

asylum restrictions, using self-congratulatory discourse to alleviate the guilt of other's suffering. Although Syria's regional neighbors are home to millions of refugees living in poor conditions, the Wall Street Journal reports, "the U.S. leads the world in refugee resettlement. In the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30, the U.S. received 70,000 refugees from 65 countries, including more than 19,000 from Iraq. In that year, more than 1,340 Syrians already in the U.S. applied for asylum" (Jordan, 2014). The humanitarian gesture suffices to alleviate the guilt that readers observing the suffering of Syrian refugees. As the Guardian states, "I get tired of telling governments they 'must' do something, knowing perfectly well that nine times out of 10 they won't. This time I have a simpler conclusion. Before we go away on holiday. That's what I shall do when I've clicked the 'send' button for this column" (Ash, 2013, para. 13). This type of humanitarian rhetoric that concludes articles on the suffering of Syrian refugees may increase donations, which is certainly helpful to some extent, but if that leaves the public feeling satisfied without calling for any larger political solution, the gesture remains insufficient.

Biopolitical control of life is delegated to aid organizations, while the sovereign powers can focus on enacting and legitimating violence. Svirsky and Bignall (2012) explain that, "humanitarian organisations [. . .] can only grasp human life in the figure of bare and sacred life, and therefore, despite themselves, maintain a secret solidarity with the very power they ought to fight" (p. 185). Contrary to defensive claims that aid organizations are doing all that they can, abandonment can be seen as an active response, on the part of nations and individuals who have the means to do something yet choose not to (Svirsky & Bignall, 2012). This is the bare life of necropolitics (Agamben, 1995a; Mbembe, 2003). Life is made sacred in the sense that it can be taken without repercussion through neglect or outright violence. Additionally, refugees, like *homo sacer*, are excluded from political life, they have no rights to education, leisure, or freedom of movement. They are registered with aid organizations that decide their caloric intake, their access to communication, and the extent to which they can participate in their own life decisions. The assemblage of the refugee as the humanitarian *raison d'être* represent a state of bare life, or *zo*, in which they are given only the basic necessities to stay alive. Moreover, representations of refugees as a humanitarian emergency denies their political agency or voice, reifies the legitimacy of the state and the social hierarchies it endorses (Daley, 2003).

4.3. Humanizing Strategies

Western media assemblages can simultaneously humanize the refugee and reproduce their dispossession. Some articles use a "backgrounding" strategy that attempts to individualize refugees through profiles, anecdotes and quotations. For example, CNN writes about Abdel, whose personal story provides the basis for an article on the broader issues that refugees face (Dellorto, 2013). Although names are often changed to protect families from repercussions, assigning pseudonyms acknowledge the humanity and individuality of the person. Graphic representations via photographs and videos embedded into online editions are other ways that western media attempts to convey empathy and solidarity with refugees. Humanization and individualization are ways of resisting the normally negative representations of refugees in media through profiles, narratives and anecdotes of daily life (KhosraviNik, 2010).

Furthermore, self-representation of refugees offers one alternative to rhetoric that is homogenizing and disempowering (Cartner, 2009). Although narratives are usually told through the experience of the journalist, aid worker, or other Western position, the reader may get a

glimpse of the personal experiences of the refugee. For example, the incorporation of quotations can be humanizing. The New York Times reports, “I used to just be a child — now I’m the head of the house,” said the 17-year-old, who spoke on the condition that he not be identified to protect his family in Syria. “I need a budget and to manage my money. I never thought of that before” (Rudoren, 2013). However, the nameless refugee whose words are printed in the article is only identified by their age, location in Hama Province and gender. Bailey refers to this as the politics of naming, in which one culture is subordinated to the other. “The politics of representation of ‘naming and leaving unnamed’ seems to be part of the construction of a web of meaning by which one culture (Western) understand and subordinates another (non-Western)” (Bailey, 2009: 1). One of the ways cultures are otherized and subordinated is by rendering them voiceless and nameless, even while they are humanized through self-representation.

However, many quotations are followed up by summaries from the perspective of Western authorities. After the quotation above, another quotation is included, “when you talk to them about the future,” said Carolyn Miles, chief executive of Save the Children, “they can’t see beyond, frankly, the next day” (Rudoren, 2013). This type of discourse may attempt to construct the refugee as human in an effort to build empathy and overcome alienating statistical representations, however, the rhetorical effect is limited by the discursive positioning of Western authoritarian summations of refugee life.

Conclusion: Assemblages of Refugees

In sum, the confinement of refugees to camps of exception is represented and rhetorically justified through assemblages of Syrian refugees as terrorists and the humanitarian *raison d’être*. Even rhetorical attempts to empower the refugee as a human may assist in the denial of political agency and limit their claims to rights within a framework of sovereign citizenship. Furthermore, postcolonialism urges readers to look beyond the mirage of totalizing objectivity constructed by any one culturally situated perspective on the complex global conflict in Syria. By seeking out subordinate or invisible positions and histories, the Syrian refugee can be understood not as a single subject, but as an assemblage of conflicting, complementary and contingent positions. This is both theoretically and pragmatically productive. First, acknowledging the multiplicity of possible social positions occupied at certain times may provide a remedy to the immunological response characteristic of colonial social phobia. Theoretically, this paper contributes to critical rhetorical studies by extending Agamben’s material conditions of *homo sacer* and the state of exception to rhetorical spaces. The state of exception can be understood as both material and rhetorical, recreating bare life and precarity through the discursive construction of the refugee Other.

First, media silences conceal assemblages of the refugee that may otherwise open spaces for alternate understandings and implications of hybridity. Western media frequently report on how much aid is distributed, how much more aid is needed, the number of refugees in certain areas, and so on, however, what is left out is equally important. Although aid certainly saves lives, U.N. protocol notifies any regime, including the one they are fleeing, of their refugee status in addition to which borders they have crossed and when. For this reason, some individuals who would qualify as a refugee may not file for refugee status in order to protect their families. Their voices are not included in stories of humanitarian outreach in refugee camps. Even when media

strategies are intended to generate sympathy and donations, the implications of these discourses maintain the machinations of the humanitarian industry which both participate in and obstruct possibilities for strategic forms of resistance. On whole, reports that prioritize the role of governments, systems of international sovereignty, and non-governmental organizations as the only solution to the “refugee crisis,” fail to recognize the ways that the struggle against oppression and violence can occur outside these traditional structures and in our daily discourse and within media representations. Retelling stories such as the informal system of support that united Israelis and Syrians is an example of hybridity, which is a strategy or discourse that “opens up a space of negotiation where power is unequal but its articulation may be equivocal” (Bhabha, 1996, p. 58). There are alternative perspectives, untold stories, and unheard voices that may reverberate in other communities, but are not represented in Western media. Thus, media silences may overlook important forms of resistance, hybridity and oppression.

Refugees who live lives completely absent of humanitarian aid out of necessity and concern for their safety are invisible and their suffering is often unheard. Many rebel groups fighting against Assad avoid the acceptance of aid in fear that they will lose credibility and support with local Syrians who fear they may be ceding loyalty or control to Western powers. This is especially important because the US has supported Israel who has perpetrated colonial histories that have greatly impacted the region. The colonial legacies that mark Syrian’s memories and divide Syrian territory make it difficult for the Syrian opposition parties to accept aid and pursue the deterritorialization of Golan Heights while still remaining credible within all factions of Syrian nationalist groups. These assemblages exist, however they are often completely invisible through the lens of Western media representations.

Finally, Agamben (1995b) defends a modernist, structuralist position of refugee subjectivity, whereas this paper reconceptualizes the marked and sacred refugee as an assemblage, not as homo sacer, but as a sacred assemblage, or *conventus sacri/conventu sacer*. Further, this analysis illustrates how the state of exception is not only material, but also rhetorical. Western media assemblages of the refugee construct a rhetorical space of exception, which deploys representations of the refugee as terrorist and humanitarian *raison d’être* to justify their abandonment on the steps of the law. The confinement of refugees to camps of exception is represented and rhetorically justified through assemblages of the refugee as terrorist and humanitarian *raison d’être*. Even rhetorical attempts to empower the refugee as a human may assist in the denial of political agency and limit their claims to rights within a framework of sovereign citizenship.

Syria is in a state of continual instability that functionally permits the use of violence against all its citizens. Assad’s claim to power and his protest against outside intervention mirrors the definition of the state of exception as a legal civil war. Following the legal provisions of the Syrian constitution, the president may only be deposed through democratic vote, not by force. In this way, the law is a rhetorical tool that legitimates Assad and his right to restore order through any means necessary, that literally “allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries, but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system” (Agamben, 2005: 2). The state of exception can be understood as the “threshold between democracy and absolutism.” (Agamben, 2005: 3). Syria parallels this concept, as Assad was allowed to maintain power and was invited to participate in the Geneva talks in the name of ‘democratic’ government, even as it is upheld through totalitarian means. Paradoxically, this

means that Assad can justify suspending components of the constitution that protect citizens, in order to uphold the constitutionality of his presidency. This study has isolated three Western media strategies that participate in geopolitical systems of power, while contextualizing them through a postcolonial perspective. As complex global conflicts continue, it is increasingly important to critically identify and connect discourses and media representations of refugees with the material and historical systems of power that are responsible for their condition.

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